

Congressman Bishop delivered the following remarks for Veterans Day on Wednesday, November 11, 2009:

Good morning! It's great to be with you today – thank you for inviting me. Today we come together as American people to honor our veterans, thanking those who have worn our nation's uniform and remembering those who made the ultimate sacrifice.

I'm honored whenever I have an opportunity to visit with veterans. Freedom ranks right up with the air we breathe on our priority list of blessings, and I—along with every American—owe a deep debt of gratitude to those of you who have faithfully served the country in order to make freedom secure.

I've been directly involved with veterans issues throughout my years in public service, and I've learned a number of things about veterans during these years.

I've learned veterans are courageous, humble people of integrity. They provide a foundation of patriotic citizenship that the country cannot do without. If the country is not being served well, veterans always get busy and do everything possible to get the country back on track. They refuse to be complacent at times when the country is not living up to its potential for greatness.

You have fought for a strong defense and a strong foreign policy. You have fought for fiscal responsibility in government. You have also fought for the benefits that veterans have earned and deserve.

I agree with George Washington, who said the morale and strength of the new nation's military forces would be directly proportional to how well veterans who had served and sacrificed for the country were treated and appreciated.

That was true two centuries ago, and it's still true today.

When I came to Congress, I asked for and received a seat on the Veterans Affairs Committee. Several years ago, I was selected to serve on the Appropriations Committee where I received a seat on the Subcommittee on Military Construction and Veterans Affairs. My position on this subcommittee has given me an opportunity to play an even bigger role in veterans' issues.

I've learned that the challenges veterans face – especially among those who have served in Iraq and Afghanistan – are daunting. This year, the Subcommittee on Military Construction and Veterans' Affairs heard testimony about the high rates of homelessness, mental illness, and unemployment amongst veterans. These conditions have been particularly exacerbated by the economic downturn.

I can confidently say that Chairman Chet Edwards and the entire Subcommittee have risen to face these challenges by providing robust funding for the Department of Veterans Affairs and its initiatives.

In July, the House passed the Fiscal Year 2010 Military Construction and Veterans Affairs

Appropriations Act which provides \$108.9 billion in funding for the Department of Veterans Affairs. The bill is currently awaiting action in the Senate. It builds on the 111th Congress' strong commitment to our veterans by providing them with the benefits they earned through their brave service – benefits such as the expanded GI Bill, education, housing, as well as many others. Just as the military pledges to never leave any soldier behind on the battlefield, we will leave no veterans behind when they come home.

Among its many provisions, the bill strengthens quality health care for more than 6 million patients – including 419,000 veterans of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. The bill also provides \$48.2 billion in advance funds for veterans' health services, so that funding for our veterans' health care is timely, reliable, and not interrupted by delayed funding or political posturing.

The legislation includes improvements in electronic health records and paperless benefits processing to make veterans health care more efficient, additional oversight and auditing of our veterans health care system, and new practices to improve access to care for veterans in rural areas. The bill also invests in mental health services and critical medical and prosthetic research to serve our wounded warriors returning from battle.

To support our troops, the bill provides funding to construct key facilities for training and housing, addressing the unfunded backlog of barracks for the young men and women entering the service. It also includes funding for the guard and reserve initiative, to recognize the critical contribution made by reserve personnel and addresses urgent unfunded requirements. It takes additional steps to support the military families who give so much in service to this country – with military child care centers, military family housing, and additional Vets Centers to provide community-based readjustment counseling for veterans and their families.

Last week I had the privilege of attending a Veterans Roundtable discussion with some of my Congressional colleagues and the leaders of Veterans' and Military Service Organizations. At these roundtables in the past, veterans have told us that military families want to make sure their voices are heard on Capitol Hill.

We listened to these concerns, and I am pleased to announce that last week we launched the bipartisan Congressional Military Family Caucus, of which I will be serving as co-Chair along with my colleague Congresswoman Cathy McMorris-Rodgers, a Republican from the state of Washington.

Last week's launch event was a huge success – standing room only! We were honored to have the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Admiral Mike Mullen, join us for the launch event and pledge his support for the Caucus and its mission. Presently we have 80+ Members of Congress who have signed up to join this Caucus and the number continues to grow!

The primary goal of the Congressional Military Family Caucus is to foster the interests of family members of the uniformed services by educating Members of Congress and their staff on the challenges that a military family faces on a daily basis. In doing this, our hope is to see that military family concerns are properly identified, addressed, and resolved.

All of my colleagues who have signed on to be a part of this Caucus have worked tirelessly — both individually and collectively — to address some of the issues that impact our military families. All of us have served on committees and subcommittees of jurisdiction, many have a military presence in our districts, and all of us have constituents who proudly serve in the military.

However, there is still work to be done — specifically on studying the effects of PTSD, the impact of back-to-back deployments on families, marriages, and mental health, as well as the impact that constant re-stationing has on education, spousal employment, and children's well-being.

That's where the Military Family Caucus comes in. We look forward to continuing to research and identify key issues that impact military families, educating our fellow Members of Congress on these concerns, and developing ways to address and resolve them. We fully understand that the strength of our military is drawn from the strength of their families and we want to do all we can to protect our warriors and their loved ones.

The last couple of weeks in Congress have been busy ones. In addition to launching the Congressional Military Family Caucus and meeting with veterans, this weekend we passed a piece of legislation that everyone's been talking about, the "Affordable Health Care for America Act."

After months of studying the various proposals, listening to feedback from my constituents on both sides of the issue in town hall meetings, informal discussions, letters, e-mails and faxes, and after prayerful reflection, I concluded that I must support the health care reform legislation because I believe it would improve the lives of my constituents by ensuring that they have access to quality, affordable health care.

That said, I want to make sure that our veterans understand that veterans' health care and TRICARE (for military families) will not be impacted by the passage of the House health care reform bill. Nothing in the bill will affect, change, or undermine the health care that veterans enrolled in VA health care and military families enrolled in TRICARE are currently receiving.

Further language has been included in the "Affordable Health Care for America Act" that makes clear that the Department of Veterans Affairs and the Department of Defense retain full authority to operate the VA health care system and TRICARE without interference from any new organizations, agencies, or commissions established by the legislation. In addition, specific language has been included to exempt TRICARE from the requirements of the essential benefits package and other insurance requirements.

It has been a priority of the 111th Congress that we treat every day as if it were Veterans Day and ensure that the needs of our veterans are met. Since January of 2007, we've provided a 58 percent increase in funding for veterans' health care and benefits. We honor our Veterans service and sacrifice with real investments in their well-being.

I pledge to continue to work tirelessly with the Military Construction and Veterans Affairs Subcommittee and the entire United States Congress to ensure that America's veterans have

the help they need to lead successful and productive lives.

I thank you for your service and devotion to our nation. God bless you all!